

Wildcards - Chapter 32: Establishing the Lair

The Cutlass screamed through the air in a whirl of slashes and strikes as the Dread Pirate began his relentless onslaught.

The Butcher attempted to block his face and torso by weaving his small knife back and forth in front of his body, but it was no use. The cutlass sliced past his defences and pierced into his skin.

James' whole body was a blur of movement as his flurry of attacks continued to rain down on the Butcher. In the briefest moments between strikes where Pedro felt he might get some respite, the Moonlight Pistol would fire at point-blank range to cause a critical hit.

After a few attempts to punch or swing his fists at the Dread Pirate, Pedro found himself reverting back into a defensive position with his arms raised protectively in front of him.

The speed of attacks grew faster as James maintained a close distance. His feet never stayed in the same space for more than a second as he pivoted, leaped and darted around his target.

James alternated between his attacks to avoid creating a pattern, and kept himself focused so as to avoid becoming complacent.

Unlike the ranged attacks with the Moonlight Pistol, this fight was dealing significant damage to Pedro. The cuts and gashes across his body weren't healing at high speed anymore. Otto noticed that fact too and started to teleport his tiny body onto any open wounds that he could find.

When Pedro slid backward in an attempt to regain his composure, James would activate *Swift Dash* to keep close to him.

Charlatan's Cutlass: Skill Steal Progress: 87%

Finally, after dealing a gratuitous amount of damage, Pedro roared at the top of his lungs and struck his bare foot down on the cobbles.

James was thankful that the Butcher telegraphed all of his attacks by shouting them aloud. It gave him ample time to activate *Swift Dodge*.

"Earth Shatter!"

The powerful voice of Pedro echoed out as the cobbles practically evaporated under his soles. A small crater appeared around the bleeding slaver as he gasped for breath. His knotted black

hair was slick with blood as he spat at the ground. Pedro no longer worried about Otto's attacks on his body, he focused everything on the Dread Pirate in front of him.

James' wrist flicked around with his pistol in hand, making sure that the Butcher had no time to recover. Bursts of moonlight erupted from the barrel of the gun as James darted forward to close the distance once more.

Pedro grimaced under the onslaught before gritting his teeth resolutely. The small blade in his hands emitted a faint glow, which was more than enough warning for James to leap out of the way.

"Cleave!"

The Butcher roared, as red lightning sliced through the air in a wild arc. Some unfortunate onlookers that had come too close to the fight were caught up in the attack and crumpled immediately under its power.

Pedro gasped again as he crouched lower to the ground, a wild and feral glint in his eye.

James didn't let him recover at all as his body launched forward to resume the barrage of his blade. It was obvious that the Butcher's reaction speed was getting worse as the fight dragged on.

The worrying part for James, was the look Pedro had in his eyes.

Shari's voice suddenly pierced through the sounds of battle, which confirmed James' fears.

"He's just gone below two thousand health!"

James glanced at the notification he kept at the edge of his vision.

Charlatan's Cutlass: Skill Steal Progress: 94%

The Dread Pirate moved backwards as he raised his pistol, firing again and again at the Butcher's exposed feet. The fact that his behaviour had changed at the same time that his health reached a certain point was worrying for James.

Pedro's tribal tattoos started to glow a deep red as he continued to gasp for breath. His laboured breathing turned into a guttural growl as he clenched both his fist and the small knife. A deadly aura enveloped him and the pink towel that wrapped around his waist started to flutter as he powered up a new attack.

The Butcher has entered Berserk Mode!

James' eyes darted between the Cutlass and the Butcher. He really wanted to finish the skill steal, but knew that getting close to a Berserker was likely a terrible idea.

Pedro's eyes suddenly widened in shock as his shoulders pulled backward. As he turned his body, James saw Shari's knife embedded deep into his back.

Otto's tiny form teleported onto the Butcher's neck, wrapping little yellow tentacles around his prey.

Each of the tattoos continued to pulsate with an angry red glow, but it was clear that Pedro was in trouble. The knife in his back was causing him much more discomfort than any of James' attacks until that point.

The Dread Pirate burst forward, swinging the Charlatan's Cutlass at the Butcher's body. Each cut aimed precisely at a bleeding wound or an area Otto had corroded.

Every attack was devastating against his deteriorating body. His erratic movements slowed for a brief moment and James swung his blade at Pedro's face.

The Charlatan's Cutlass flashed a vibrant green and James instinctively checked the notification.

Charlatan's Cutlass: Skill Steal Complete

Cleave! (Requires Blade)

- A powerful slashing attack with characteristics determined by the user's highest attribute.

James wasted no time in trying out his new attack. Before he could stop himself, he shouted the name of the attack, just like Pedro did.

"Cleave!"

The Charlatan's Cutlass whipped around, but instead of creating red lightning, a wide green blade sliced forward and cut deeply into the Butcher's body.

A despairing wail ripped out of Pedro as he collapsed to the ground with a look of confusion written all over his face.

You have defeated The Butcher.

Before James could react, an elegantly dressed woman strode out of a nearby building. She wore a form-fitting velvet dress that was only accentuated by a plunging neckline that drew the eye. Wavy dark hair was perfectly combed to one side which framed her beautiful face.

"Camila. A pleasure to meet you."

James looked at her suspiciously. After witnessing that fight, nobody in their right mind would be approaching him for fear of getting hurt. This woman was brave, stupid or incredibly confident.

Her deep red lips curved into an enchanting smile as she extended her hand to the Dread Pirate.

Definitely confident.

James thought to himself as he turned the pistol in his hand. Instead of actively aiming it at the new arrival, he kept it in a neutral position between Pedro and Camila.

Camila's eyes narrowed ever so slightly before her smile grew even wider. Retracting her offered hand, she instead gestured at the fallen Butcher.

"Well done on your fight! Not many people would be able to take on Pedro and live to tell the tale."

Her shaded eyes fluttered as her voice lilted with relief.

James remained quiet. His silence acted as an invitation for the woman to continue.

"The Escravo Cartel... nasty business, but someone could argue, a necessary evil."

Camila glanced at James to see his reaction. He could tell that she was testing him.

James wondered what would be the best approach. He wasn't sure if this would result in a quest, so he wanted to be sure that he didn't make any mistakes.

While he was thinking, Pedro rolled onto his back after finally pulling out Shari's knife. Instead of taking any form of violent action, the large Slaver scratched his chest and yawned.

"Camila wants to know if you're going to kill me or not."

James looked at the Butcher who merely scratched himself through the pink towel that had miraculously survived throughout the encounter. He couldn't help but smile.

"What happens if I kill you?"

Pedro sighed as he waved his hands in the air like it didn't matter.

"Ugh, if you kill me. It affects her distribution, so she'll try to make a deal with you..."

The Butcher rolled his eyes as he then waved his hands in a different direction.

"Or, she'll try and kill you. But if she does that, then the other factions will see that she's vulnerable."

Pedro finished with a laugh as he looked at Camila.

"That was a fun fight! Did you see the little Octopus thing? Where did it go?"

The Butcher looked around to see if he could spy Otto through all the chaos. Gone was the terrifying berserker.

Camila's smile tightened ever so slightly as she looked between the Butcher and James. Taking a cautious step backward, towards the safety of her brothel, she changed tactics.

"I would prefer if we could settle this amicably."

The Viska Network would like to trade with you.

James ignored the notification and Camila as he stood over the Butcher. The barbaric slaver still had a stupidly wide smile on his face. It was clear that he didn't fear death.

"Pedro, I would like you to join my crew."

Camila's expression softened as she exhaled slowly. When Pedro didn't answer immediately, she finally broke her facade.

"You stupid oaf, accept his offer!"

Her voice was scathing and desperate as she shouted at the Butcher who just continued to laugh.

While still on his back, he held up three fingers to the Dread Pirate.

"Here are my three conditions!"

James could only laugh as he gestured for Pedro to continue.

"Okay. First, I want your Faction to absorb the Escravo Cartel... or, what's left of it."

James nodded his head in agreement. It would give him more followers and territory, which were both very important for his own development and growth.

"Second. I want you to create a non-aggression pact with Camila. You can't kill her."

Pedro used his free hand to point at James directly.

"That's an important one!"

The Dread Pirate glanced at Camila one more time, as if weighing up the option. It was enjoyable for James to see the confident woman looking uneasy for once.

James eventually conceded.

"I agree. I will create a non-aggression pact with the Viska Network."

Pedro nodded his head before attempting to sit up and turn around. Cradling his head with his free hand, the Butcher groaned in pain before revealing his third request.

"I want a demon, just like the little Octopus. Can I get one of them?"

James burst out laughing as Otto conveniently appeared on his shoulder. The Butcher's face lit up when he saw the little creature.

Looking at the little void demon, James decided to be honest with the Butcher.

"Otto is bound to me by a Demon Contract. If you raise your reputation with the Goddess of Charisma or the Demonic Race, she may reward you with a contract of your own."

James thought the Butcher would be upset, but the large man twisted around to look at Camila with excitement on his face. Her reaction was unreadable.

For some reason, Pedro was laughing as he turned back to James.

"I will join your crew."

The Dread Pirate extended his hand to the Butcher who grasped it firmly.

Quest Complete: Destroy the Escravo Cartel.

Pedro the Butcher has joined the Dread Faction.

Pedro the Butcher has become your Quartermaster.

The Escravo Cartel has become a part of the Dread Faction.

The Dread Faction now controls 14% of Rayth.

The Dread Faction has entered a non-aggression pact with the Viska Network.

The Dread Faction has become neutral with the Alldark Orphanage.

The Dread Faction has become neutral with the Galar Faction.

The Dread Faction is now hostile with the Vigo Syndicate

James quickly read through the notifications that jumped at him all at once. He would have Jackal sort everything out for him later.

While he really wanted to get stuck into his battle report and statistics, one of the notifications caught his attention.

You have met the criteria to Establish a Lair.

Would you like to proceed?

James grinned as he eagerly accepted the prompt.

Eligible Areas for Lair:

Escravo Warehouse - Industrial District, Rayth

Congratulations! Your Lair has been Established!

Just as he was reading through the different push notifications, Pedro started to speak in confusion.

"Does anyone else hear that voice?"

The Dread Pirate glanced up from the notifications in confusion, not sure what was happening, but it was Shari who answered the Butcher.

"It's Dervius. You should answer him."

James had expected her to be annoyed with the fact that they had just recruited a Slaver into the faction, but the Rogue's expression was gentle as though she was reassuring a friend. James realised he had never actually seen the transformation that happened to Shari as he had left her with the slavers before. He had the opportunity this time to witness it.

However, Pedro just stood uncharacteristically still for a few moments before shaking his head.

"No. I don't want to worship a God."

With that said, he nodded his thanks to Shari before making eye contact with James and finally, Camila.

Everyone then watched as the Butcher readjusted his pink towel and walked back into the brothel.

James could still hear his voice clearly as he called out to someone.

"Where are my damn clothes?!"

The Dread Pirate took the time to open up his battle reports and have a look at the results of their siege. Before he absorbed himself in the stats, he glanced around to see what the crowd was doing.

A group of attractive women were ushering some of the men back into the building that Camila owned. The Brothel owner herself was still watching the Dread Pirate, probably waiting to give a quest or start a new line of dialogue.

James dismissed her momentarily as he looked to see Shari retrieving her knife from the ground with a wide smile on her face.

"You look happy!"

He laughed, she was probably delighted to have survived the mini war they had just waged on the town.

Shari turned to face the Dread Pirate with a beaming smile.

"We completed our Quest!"

James nodded his head as he opened up the battle report.

"Yes we did..."

He answered distractedly as the notification popped up in front of him.

Battle Report 1 of 1: Dread Faction vs. Escravo Cartel

Enemies Defeated: 127

Highest Damage: Sylvian

Most Kills: Sylvian (63)

Least Kills: Otto (22)

Dread Faction Experience: 29,154 XP (24,295 + 20%)

- (x108) Slaver Grunt: 150 XP (16,200)
- (x21) Slaver Enforcer: 175 XP (3,675)
- (x16) Slaver Archer: 120 XP (1,920)
- (x1) The Butcher: 2,500 XP
- (+20%) Villainous Affinity Multiplier

Sylvian Experience: 13,584 (11,320 + 20%)

- (x46) Slaver Grunt: 150 XP (6,900)
- (x16) Slaver Archer: 120 XP (1,920)
- (x1) The Butcher: 2,500 XP (2,500)
- (+20%) Villainous Affinity Multiplier

Experience Granted: 0 XP

Faction Experience Cut: 1946.2 XP (12.5% of 15,570 XP)

Experience Total: 15,530.2 XP

Progress to Next Level: 100%

Preferred Weapon: Charlatan's Cutlass

- Highest Damage: 724
- Total Kills: 14

Preferred Skill: Cleave

- Skill Progress: Unknown

Charlatan's Cutlass:

- Skill Steal Progress: 0%
- Skills Stolen:
 - Cleave

"Well... fuck."

James just stared at the battle report for a few moments, not exactly sure where to begin. Glancing up at Otto, he looked back at the report with an amused expression.

"Obviously, you'd go for the toughest ones first. Guessing you killed all the Slaver Enforcers?"

James asked rhetorically, knowing the little octopus couldn't answer. Despite that fact, the tiny void demon appeared on the Dread Pirate's shoulder with a raised tentacle.

"Great work, Otto!"

James praised him as he looked back at the battle report. A part of him was incredibly grateful that Jackal implemented the Faction Experience setting. His cut of 12.5% was very substantial after such a large battle... so much so that it put his experience at 100%?

The Dread Pirate frowned for a moment as he brought up his profile screen, curious as to why the percentage was maxed out.

Name:	Sylvian
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Class:	Dread Pirate
Title:	God Shamer
Level:	25
Rank:	Standard
Deity:	Dervius
Race:	Human
Alignment:	Villain
Affinity:	Water
Domain:	Dread Lake
Lair:	Escravo Warehouse - Industrial District, Rayth
Contracted Demon:	Otto (Void Demon)

Stats	Base	Modifier	Actual Value
Strength	3	0	3
Intelligence	9	-9	0
Charisma	1	24 (Standard Lvl 25: +5)	25
Dexterity	4	80 (Standard Lvl 25: +10) (Aimpatch: +10)	94
Wisdom	3	0	3
Luck	0	0	0

James looked at it for a few more moments in confusion. There was no way that he had earned enough experience from killing the Slavers to warrant getting to the maximum level. His attributes had changed too to reflect the level change.

"Shari, what level are you?"

The Rogue's smile didn't leave her face as she answered quickly.

"Mastery Rank, Level 1."

The Dread Pirate couldn't hide his shock.

"You've managed to ascend rank? How did you do that? Congratulations!"

James was genuinely happy, even though he knew that Shari wasn't real and that this was all a game. She was still his follower. He had converted her from a Commoner into a Rogue, and now, after just a day of fighting... she already ascended into the Master rank.

Shari explained quickly as she gestured at her new equipment. The changes were very subtle, but her cloak was now much darker in colour. Her leather wrappings were now made of what looked like a fine cloth. James imagined that it allowed her to move quietly.

"My ascendancy quest was to destroy the Escravo Cartel. When we defeated the Butcher, Dervius spoke to me again!"

James was curious. He didn't know exactly how this all worked. Why hadn't Dervius spoken to him?

Instead of asking Shari any further questions, he brought up her profile.

Name:	Shari
Class:	Night Blade
Title:	Slaver's Bane
Level:	1
Rank:	Master
Deity:	Dervius
Race:	Human
Alignment:	Villain
Affinity:	Darkness
Domain:	Rayth

"Slaver's Bane?"

James asked with a laugh which caused Shari to awkwardly shuffle.

"It just happened when we were killing them, didn't you get the same one?"

The Dread Pirate simply shook his head as he looked through his notifications.

"No, I'm still the God Shamer. Which I'm sure Calista is thrilled about."

Finally he found his answer.

Completed Quest Summary:

Sylvian completed 1 Faction Quest:

Destroy the Escravo Cartel

- 15,000 XP
- Equipment from The Butcher (Rare)

Shari completed her Ascendancy Quest:

Destroy the Escravo Cartel

- Rank Upgrade (Master)
- Class Upgrade (Night Blade)

Shari completed 1 Class Quest:

Assassinate 25 Slavers

- 4,000 XP
- +2 Dexterity

James was about to look at his active quests when the familiar deep voice called out to him.

"Are you ready to see your new territory?"

Pedro asked from the doorway of the brothel. He was fully dressed in a form-fitting white shirt and black pants. The pink towel was nowhere to be seen and the Butcher casually pulled on his boots as he looked at the Dread Pirate.

"The Escravo Warehouses aren't far from here. I'll show you the way."

Pedro sauntered forward across the cobbled streets as he gestured with his muscled arms to each building that they passed. His descriptions were somewhat lacking but he decided to fill in the blanks with some choice opinions.

"That one, just there... used to be the home of some noble guy. It's used as a headquarters for some secret society now that I'm not supposed to know about."

- **Hidden Quest: Discover the Secret Society in Rayth**
 - Uncovered Clues (1/3)

Pedro paused for a moment as they came to a junction in the street that led off in two directions. He frowned for a moment before looking in both directions. James followed his gaze but wasn't able to see anything out of the ordinary. If anything, the town looked to be quite basic. He had a few questions of his own but wasn't necessarily sure if the Butcher was going to be able to answer them. James couldn't help but marvel at how nonchalant the Butcher was. They had only just fought on that very same street a short while ago, but here he was, acting as a tour guide for the bustling town of Rayth.

As the short journey progressed, James was inundated with helpful pop-ups as he made new discoveries.

You have discovered a Smithy!

You have discovered a Tavern!

You have discovered a Tailor!

You have discovered a Store!

Whatever James had expected from Rayth, this town was most certainly not it. From Jackal's description of the place, James assumed that it was going to be a small settlement with a few dozen people and a handful of starter quests for him to learn the ropes. The reality was a lot different. Rayth was like a small city, with distinctly different districts and residents with various styles of clothing and armour.

"Pedro, how many people live in Rayth?"

James decided to ask.

Without turning around, the Butcher just snorted.

"Too many if you ask me. Lots of useless people around here that don't contribute anything."

James took a breath before trying again.

"You were a member of the Escravo Cartel... and you held territory here. How many other factions exist here?"

He was almost certain that he'd get another useless answer from the Butcher, but Pedro managed to surprise him.

"We looked after the docks, warehouses and most of the industrial district."

Pedro turned around abruptly and pointed in the direction they were walking. He gave James a meaningful look as he gestured.

"It was a lot worse than it is now, which I hope you'll appreciate. There's still a lot of work that we needed to do, but I guess it's always going to be hard when you're at war."

James wanted to know what he had meant by war, but the Butcher was still speaking.

"Viska Network, that's Camila over in the Entertainment District. She says that she only runs the Veil, but she has a whole spy operation in Rayth. Nothing happens in this city without her knowing about it. Her biggest rival is Fibber, the leader of the Vigo Syndicate. They act like a damn cult if you ask me... dealing in lies and schemes. They're like snakes! Oh, and they live in the Financial District."

You have learned more about the Viska Network. Information can be found in your Journal.

You have learned more about the Vigo Syndicate. Information can be found in your Journal.

Pedro spat on the ground after speaking about the Vigo Syndicate. James remembered that he had gotten a notification about them earlier. They were hostile towards him.

"Alldark Orphanage is in the Merchant District. Keep a close eye on your coin, they're the fastest little shits you're ever going to meet."

You have learned more about the Alldark Orphanage. Information can be found in your Journal.

The Butcher paused for a moment after saying that.

"Actually... I really want to see them try to take your money. You're faster I think! Haha, this is going to be good!"

Pedro started to laugh as he contemplated going toward the Merchant Quarter there and then. After a brief moment, he shook his head.

"Okay, not now... but later! I want to be with you when they try to pickpocket."

The Butcher thought for another moment before finally clicking his fingers.

"Ah, they're always the ones I forget! The Galar. They're over in the libraries. They keep trying to get people to call it the Scholar District, but nobody cares about them. They were the weakest faction up until a short while ago."

You have learned more about the Galar Faction. Information can be found in your Journal.

James couldn't resist this time.

"What changed?"

Pedro glanced back at him and waved his hand vaguely in the air.

"Some new person came in and started messing shit up, just like you. Although, this one wasn't nearly as violent as you! It's a new faction, I don't remember the name."

Information added to Journal: Someone is improving the Galar Faction

James wondered if it was another Wildcard in the area. He was grateful that the system added a reminder for him to look into it at a later date.

Pedro's pace increased as he saw his destination in sight. A wide smile appeared on his face as he pointed towards a run down warehouse in the distance. It was hastily assembled with a combination of stone and wood. A few brutish looking men were posted outside, fully armed with swords.

"It probably doesn't look like much to you, but I assure you, it's perfect!"

The Butcher laughed as he waved at the men.

Suddenly as though he had just thought of something brilliant, Pedro stopped and reached to his belt.

"Since you bested me in battle and I'm no longer the Slaver Captain..."

Pedro pulled a long black leather coat from his inventory. The back of it was frayed, but it looked to be militaristic in design. The collar wasn't too obtrusive and the front looked as though it was double breasted with an assortment of silver buttons that had faded from years of use.

You have received a new piece of Equipment!

- **Slaver Captain Greatcloak** (Rare Grade)
 - +5 to Strength
 - Ability Granted: Intimidate
 - Ability Granted: Command
 - Ability Granted: Capture

The Butcher laughed as he handed it over to James.

"I'll need to find myself a Quartermaster coat... whatever that looks like!"

The Dread Pirate wasted no time in equipping the Jacket. He couldn't believe that he had managed to get more skills and wanted to know immediately what they could do.

Skill: Intimidate

Type: Action

Level: 1

Progress: Unknown

Modifiers: Charisma, Strength

Action: Influence an opponent's opinion of you through coercion or threats.

Results: Opponent will do your bidding for a finite period of time.

Skill: Command

Type: Action

Level: 1

Progress: Unknown

Modifiers: Charisma, Strength

Action: Give orders to a group of allies to increase their performance.

Results: Subordinates that successfully follow your orders will gain a Buff.

Skill: Capture

Type: Action

Level: 1

Progress: Unknown

Modifiers: Strength, Dexterity

Action: Physically capture and subdue your target.

Results: Target gains *Prisoner* debuff and becomes eligible for trade or *Recruitment*

"These are incredible!"

James marvelled as he read through the descriptions of the different skills he had just been granted. He hadn't up until this point appreciated the versatility of the Slavers.

"It's pretty good! I'm keeping this baby though."

Pedro teased as he pulled two gauntlets from his inventory. James wasn't able to inspect them, but from seeing the black metal with silver etchings he could appreciate that they were likely very powerful.

After putting away his main weapons, Pedro practically jogged the remaining distance to the entrance of the warehouse. His leather boots thudded against planks of wood which caused James to look down in confusion.

The cobbles had disappeared at some point throughout their journey, only to be replaced by a slick mud. The surrounding buildings seemed to have degraded in quality the closer they got to the warehouse. Finally, after a few more paces, it became clear that the whole area had been raided or picked clean to the point that it was a barren wasteland. There were no signs of residents, shops or even sanitation. It was practically a swamp at the edge of the town. Even the streetlights came to an abrupt halt. Makeshift torches were all that remained, shoved into the ground alongside planks of wood that the Butcher happily threaded upon.

"It's... terrible."

James couldn't even lie to preserve the Butcher's feelings. If the wall wasn't visible in the distance, James would have guessed that they had just walked out of Rayth completely.

Pedro turned back with a grin as he rolled his eyes.

"The Cartel doesn't specialise in decoration or building things... we trade things for profits."

James just nodded as they finally arrived at the warehouse. The two men outside looked at James as though they knew him for years. Each of them gave him a wide grin before stepping to the side to allow him entry. Pedro continued to lead the way as he pulled the large warehouse door to one side, gritting his teeth briefly as the gigantic structure slid across the congealed dirt and muck. James would have guessed that the door would require at least three people to move. Yet the Butcher just threw it to one side as though it was nothing.

James looked around again with confusion on his face.

"So what do you invest those profits in?"

Pedro grabbed a nearby torch as led the way into the warehouse.

"Why don't you see for yourself?"

When the room illuminated around Pedro's torch, James was completely stunned at what he saw.